



The  
Overstory

*A Novel*

Richard  
Powers

*Winner of the National Book Award*

THE  
**OVERSTORY**

A NOVEL



RICHARD POWERS



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*The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

*Earth may be alive: not as the ancients saw her—a sentient Goddess with a purpose and foresight—but alive like a tree. A tree that quietly exists, never moving except to sway in the wind, yet endlessly conversing with the sunlight and the soil. Using sunlight and water and nutrient minerals to grow and change. But all done so imperceptibly, that to me the old oak tree on the green is the same as it was when I was a child.*

—JAMES LOVELOCK

*Tree . . . he watching you. You look at tree, he listen to you. He got no finger, he can't speak. But that leaf . . . he pumping, growing, growing in the night. While you sleeping you dream something. Tree and grass same thing.*

—BILL NEIDJIE

## ROOTS

**F**irst there was nothing. Then there was everything.

*Then, in a park above a western city after dusk, the air is raining messages.*

*A woman sits on the ground, leaning against a pine. Its bark presses hard against her back, as hard as life. Its needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words.*

*It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering.*

*It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch.*

*It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.*

*The woman does exactly that. Signals rain down around her like seeds.*

*Talk runs far afield tonight. The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; soon they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind's gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red clusters. Ancient oaks wave prophecies of future weather. The several hundred kinds of hawthorn laugh at the single name they're forced to share. Laurels insist that even death is nothing to lose sleep over.*

*Something in the air's scent commands the woman: Close your eyes and think of willow. The weeping you see will be wrong. Picture an acacia thorn. Nothing in your thought will be sharp enough. What hovers right above you? What floats over your head right now—now?*

*Trees even farther away join in: All the ways you imagine us—bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a sal—are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above.*

*That's the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count.*

*A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning.*

*The pine she leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear.*

NICHOLAS HOEL





NOW IS THE TIME of chestnuts.

People are hurling stones at the giant trunks. The nuts fall all around them in a divine hail. It happens in countless places this Sunday, from Georgia to Maine. Up in Concord, Thoreau takes part. He feels he is casting rocks at a sentient being, with a duller sense than his own, yet still a blood relation. *Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity. . . .*

In Brooklyn, on Prospect Hill, the new arrival, Jørgen Hoel, laughs at the hard rain his throws bring down. Each time his stone hits, food shakes down by the shovelful. Men dash about like thieves, stuffing caps, sacks, and trouser cuffs with nuts freed from their enclosing burrs. Here it is, the fabled free banquet of America—yet one more windfall in a country that takes even its scraps right from God's table.

The Norwegian and his friends from the Brooklyn Navy Yard eat their bounty roasted over great bonfires in a clearing in the woods. The charred nuts are comforting beyond words: sweet and savory, rich as a honeyed potato, earthy and mysterious all at once. The burred husks prickle, but their *No* is more of a tease than any real barrier. The nuts *want* to slip free of their spiny protection. Each one volunteers to be eaten, so others might be spread far afield.

That night, drunk on roasted chestnuts, Hoel proposes to Vi Powys, an Irish girl from the pine-framed row houses two blocks from his tenement, on the edge of Finn Town. No one within three thousand miles has the right to object. They marry before Christmas. By February, they are Americans. In the spring, the chestnuts bloom again, long, shaggy catkins waving in the wind like whitecaps on the glaucous Hudson.

Citizenship comes with a hunger for the uncut world. The couple assemble their movable goods and make the overland trip through the great tracts of eastern white pine, into the dark beech forests of Ohio, across the midwestern oak breaks, and out to the settlement near Fort Des Moines in the new state of Iowa, where the authorities give away land platted yesterday to anyone who will farm it. Their nearest neighbors are two miles away. They plow and plant four dozen acres that first year. Corn, potatoes, and beans. The work is brutal, but theirs. Better than building ships for any country's navy.

Then comes the prairie winter. The cold tests their will to live. Nights in the gap-riddled cabin zero their blood. They must crack the ice in the water basin every morning just to splash their faces. But they are young, free, and driven—the sole backers of their own existence. Winter doesn't kill them. Not yet. The blackest despair at the heart of them gets pressed to diamond.

When it's time to plant again, Vi is pregnant. Hoel puts his ear to her belly. She laughs at his awe-slapped face. "What is it saying?"

He answers in his blunt, thumping English. "Feed me!"

That May, Hoel discovers six chestnuts stuffed in the pocket of the smock he wore on the day he proposed to his wife. He presses them into the earth of western Iowa, on the treeless prairie around the cabin. The farm is hundreds of miles from the chestnut's native range, a thousand from the chestnut feasts of Prospect Hill. Each month, those green forests of the East grow harder for Hoel to remember.

But this is America, where men and trees take the most surprising outings. Hoel plants, waters, and thinks: *One day, my children will shake the trunks and eat for free.*

. . .

THEIR FIRSTBORN DIES in infancy, killed by a thing that doesn't yet have a name. There are no microbes, yet. God is the lone taker of children, snatching even placeholder souls from one world to the other, according to obscure timetables.

One of the six chestnuts fails to sprout. But Jørgen Hoel keeps the surviving seedlings alive. Life is a battle between the Maker and His creation. Hoel grows expert at the fight. Keeping his trees going is trivial, compared to the other wars he must wage each day. At the end of the first season, his fields are full and the best of his seedlings stands over two feet tall.

In four more years, the Hoels have three children and the hint of a chestnut grove. The sprigs come up spindly, their brown stems lined with lenticels. The lush, scalloped, saw-toothed, spiny leaves dwarf the twigs they bud from. Aside from these starts and a few scattered bur oaks in the bottomlands, the homestead is an island in a grassy sea.

Even the skinny starts already have their uses:

Tea from infant trees for heart trouble,  
leaves from young sprouts to cure sores,  
cold bark brew to stop bleeding after birth,  
warmed galls to pare back an infant's navel,  
leaves boiled with brown sugar for coughs,  
poultices for burns, leaves to stuff a talking mattress,  
an extract for despair, when anguish is too much. . . .

The years unfold both fat and lean. Though their average tends toward runty, Jørgen detects an upward trend. Every year that he plows, he breaks more land. And the future Hoel labor pool keeps growing. Vi sees to that.

The trees thicken like enchanted things. Chestnut is quick: *By the time an ash has made a baseball bat, a chestnut has made a dresser.* Bend over to look at a sapling, and it'll put your eye out. Fissures in their bark swirl like barber poles as the trunks twist upward. In the wind the branches flicker between dark and paler green. The globes of leaves sweep out, seeking ever more sun. They wave in the humid August, the way Hoel's wife will still sometimes shake free her once-amber hair. By the time war comes again to the infant country, the five trunks have surpassed the one who planted them.

The pitiless winter of '62 tries to take another baby. It settles for one of the trees. The oldest child, John, destroys another, the summer after. It never occurs to the boy that stripping half the tree's leaves to use as play money might kill it.

Hoel yanks his son's hair. "How do you like it? Hm?" He cracks the boy with his open palm. Vi must throw her body in between them to stop the beating.

The draft arrives in '63. The young and single men go first. Jørgen Hoel, at thirty-three, with a wife, small children, and a few hundred acres, gets deferred. He never does help preserve America. He has a smaller country to save.

Back in Brooklyn, a poet-nurse to the Union dying writes: *A leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.* Jørgen never reads these words. Words strikes him as a ruse. His maize and beans and squash—all growing things alone disclose the wordless mind of God.

One more spring, and the three remaining trees burst out in cream-colored flowers. The blooms smell acrid, gamy, sour, like old shoes or rank undergarments. Then comes a thimbleful of sweet nuts. Even that small harvest reminds the man and his exhausted wife of the falling manna that brought them together, one night in the woods east of Brooklyn.

"There will be bushels," Jørgen says. His mind is already making bread, coffee, soups, cakes,

gravies—all the delicacies that the natives knew this tree could give. “We can sell the extra, in town.”

“Christmas presents for the neighbors,” Vi decides. But it’s the neighbors who must keep the Hoels alive, in that year’s brutal drought. One more chestnut dies of thirst in a season when not even the future can be spared a drop of water.

Years pass. The brown trunks start to gray. Lightning in a parched fall, with so few prairie targets tall enough to bother with, hits one of the remaining chestnut pair. Wood that might have been good for everything from cradles to coffins goes up in flames. Not enough survives to make so much as a three-legged stool.

The sole remaining chestnut goes on flowering. But its blooms have no more blooms to answer them. No mates exist for countless miles around, and a chestnut, though both male and female, will not serve itself. Yet still this tree has a secret tucked into the thin, living cylinder beneath its bark. Its cells obey an ancient formula: *Keep still. Wait*. Something in the lone survivor knows that even the ironclad law of Now can be outlasted. There’s work to do. Star-work, but earthbound all the same. Or as the nurse to the Union dead writes: *Stand cool and composed before a million universes*. As cool and composed as wood.

THE FARM SURVIVES the chaos of God’s will. Two years after Appomattox, between tilling, plowing, planting, roguing, weeding, and harvesting, Jørgen finishes the new house. Crops come in and are carried off. Hoel sons step into the traces alongside their ox-like father. Daughters disperse in marriage to nearby farms. Villages sprout up. The dirt track past the farm turns into a real road.

The youngest son works in the Polk County Assessor’s Office. The middle boy becomes a banker in Ames. The eldest son, John, stays on the farm with his family and works it as his parents decline. John Hoel throws in with speed, progress, and machines. He buys a steam tractor that both plows and threshes, reaps and binds. It bellows as it works, like something set free from hell.

For the last remaining chestnut, all this happens in a couple of new fissures, an inch of added rings. The tree bulks out. Its bark spirals upward like Trajan’s Column. Its scalloped leaves carry on turning sunlight into tissue. It more than abides; it flourishes, a globe of green health and vigor.

And in the second June of the new century, here is Jørgen Hoel, in bed in an oak-trimmed upstairs room of the house he built, a bedroom he can no longer leave, looking out the dormer window onto a school of leaves, swimming and shining in the sky. His son’s steam tractor hammers down in the north forty, but Jørgen Hoel mistakes the sounds for weather. The branches dapple him. Something about those green and toothy leaves, a dream he once had, a vision of increase and flourishing, causes a feast to fall all around his head again.

He wonders: What makes the bark twist and swirl so, in a tree so straight and wide? Could it be the spinning of the Earth? Is it trying to get the attention of men? Seven hundred years before, a chestnut in Sicily two hundred feet around sheltered a Spanish queen and her hundred mounted knights from a raging storm. That tree will outlive, by a hundred years and more, the man who has never heard of it.

“Do you remember?” Jørgen asks the woman who holds his hand. “Prospect Hill? How we ate that night!” He nods toward the leafy limbs, the land beyond. “I gave you that. And you gave me—all of this! This country. My life. My freedom.”

But the woman who holds his hand is not his wife. Vi has died five years ago, of infected

lungs.

“Sleep now,” his granddaughter tells him, and lays his hand back on his spent chest. “We’ll all be just downstairs.”

JOHN HOEL BURIES HIS FATHER beneath the chestnut the man planted. A three-foot cast-iron fence now surrounds the scattering of graves. The tree above casts its shade with equal generosity on the living and the dead. The trunk has grown too thick for John to embrace. The lowest skirt of surviving branches lifts out of reach.

The Hoel Chestnut becomes a landmark, what farmers call a *sentinel tree*. Families navigate by it on Sunday outings. Locals use it to direct travelers, the lone lighthouse in a grain-filled sea. The farm prospers. There’s seed money now to breed and propagate. With his father gone and his brothers off on their own, John Hoel is free to chase after the latest machines. His equipment shed fills with reapers and winnowers and twine-binders. He travels out to Charles City to see the first two-cylinder gas-powered tractors. When phone lines come through, he subscribes, although it costs a fortune and no one in the family can think what the thing might be good for.

The immigrant’s son yields to the disease of improvement years before there’s an effective cure for it. He buys himself a Kodak No. 2 Brownie. *You push the button, we do the rest*. He must send the film to Des Moines for developing and printing, a process that soon costs many times more than the two-dollar camera. He photographs his wife in calico and a crumpled smile, poised over the new mechanical clothes mangle. He photographs his children running the combine and riding swaybacked draft horses along the fields’ headers. He photographs his family in their Easter finest, bound with bonnets and garroted by bow ties. When nothing else of his little postage stamp of Iowa is left to photograph, John turns his camera on the Hoel Chestnut, his exact coeval.

A few years before, he bought his youngest girl a zoopraxiscope for her birthday, though he alone kept playing with it, after she grew bored. Now those squadrons of flapping geese and parades of bucking broncos that come alive when the glass drum spins animate his brain. A grand plan occurs to him, as if he invented it. He decides, for whatever years are left to him, to capture the tree and see what the thing looks like, sped up to the rate of human desire.

He builds a tripod in the equipment shop. Then he sets a broken grinding stone on a rise near the house. And on the first day of spring, 1903, John Hoel positions the No. 2 Brownie and takes a full-length portrait of the sentinel chestnut leafing out. One month later to the day, from the same spot and the same hour, he takes another. The twenty-first of every month finds him up on his rise. It becomes a ritual devotion, even in rain and snow and killing heat, his own private liturgy of the Church of the Spreading Vegetative God. His wife teases him without mercy, as do his children. “He’s waiting for it to do something interesting.”

When he assembles the first year’s twelve black-and-white prints and riffles them with his thumb, they show precious little for his enterprise. In one instant, the tree makes leaves from nothing. In the next, it offers up everything to the thickening light. Otherwise, the branches merely endure. But farmers are patient men tried by brutal seasons, and if they weren’t plagued by dreams of generation, few would keep plowing, spring after spring. John Hoel is out on his rise again on March 21, 1904, as if he, too, might have another hundred years or two to document what time hides forever in plain sight.

TWELVE HUNDRED MILES EAST, in the city where John Hoel’s mother sewed dresses and

his father built ships, disaster hits before anyone knows it. The killer slips into the country from Asia, in the wood of Chinese chestnuts destined for fancy gardens. A tree in the Bronx Zoological Park turns October colors in July. Leaves curl and scorch to the hue of cinnamon. Rings of orange spots spread across the swollen bark. At the slightest press, the wood caves in.

Within a year, orange spots fleck chestnuts throughout the Bronx—the fruiting bodies of a parasite that has already killed its host. Every infection releases a horde of spores on the rain and wind. City gardeners mobilize a counterattack. They lop off infected branches and burn them. They spray trees with a lime and copper sulfate from horse-drawn wagons. All they do is spread the spores on the axes they use to cut the victims down. A researcher at the New York Botanical Garden identifies the killer as a fungus new to man. He publishes the results and leaves town to beat the summer heat. When he returns a few weeks later, not a chestnut in the city is worth saving.

Death races across Connecticut and Massachusetts, jumping dozens of miles a year. Trees succumb by the hundreds of thousands. A country watches dumbstruck as New England's priceless chestnuts melt away. The tree of the tanning industry, of railroad ties, train cars, telegraph poles, fuel, fences, houses, barns, fine desks, tables, pianos, crates, paper pulp, and endless free shade and food—the most harvested tree in the country—is vanishing.

Pennsylvania tries to cut a buffer hundreds of miles wide across the state. In Virginia, on the northern edge of the country's richest chestnut forests, people call for a religious revival to purge the sin behind the plague. America's perfect tree, backbone of entire rural economies, the limber, durable redwood of the East with three dozen industrial uses—every fourth tree of a forest stretching two hundred million acres from Maine down to the Gulf—is doomed.

NEWS OF THE BLIGHT doesn't reach western Iowa. John Hoel returns to his rise on the twenty-first of each month, in all weather. The Hoel Chestnut keeps lifting the high-water mark of its leaves. *It's after something*, the farmer thinks, his lone venture into philosophy. *It has a plan.*

On the night before his fifty-sixth birthday, John wakes up at two a.m. and feels around on the bed as if looking for something. His wife asks what's wrong. Through clenched teeth he answers, "It'll pass." Eight minutes later, he's dead.

The farm descends upon his first two sons. The elder, Carl, wants to write off the sunk costs of the photo ritual. Frank, the younger, needs to redeem his father's decade of obscure research by carrying it forward as stubbornly as the tree spreads its crown. More than a hundred frames along, the oldest, shortest, slowest, most ambitious silent movie ever shot in Iowa begins to reveal the tree's goal. A flip through the shots shows the subject stretching and patting about for something in the sky. A mate, perhaps. More light. Chestnut vindication.

When America at last joins the world conflagration, Frank Hoel is sent to France with the Second Cavalry Regiment. He makes his nine-year-old son Frank Jr. promise to keep taking pictures until his return. It's a year for long promises. What the boy lacks in imagination he makes up for in obedience.

Pure, dumb fate leads Frank Sr. out of the cauldron of Saint-Mihiel only to liquefy him with a mortar shell in the Argonne, near Montfaucon. There isn't enough left to put in a pine box and bury. The family makes a time capsule of his caps, pipes, and watches and sinks it in the family plot, under the tree that he photographed every month for a too-short while.

IF GOD HAD A BROWNIE, He might shoot another animated short subject: blight hovering a moment before plunging down the Appalachians into the heart of chestnut country. The chestnuts up North were majestic. But the southern trees are gods. They form near-pure stands for miles on end. In the Carolinas, boles older than America grow ten feet wide and a hundred and twenty feet tall. Whole forests of them flower in rolling clouds of white. Scores of mountain communities are built from the beautiful, straight-grained wood. A single tree might yield as many as fourteen thousand planks. The stocks of food that fall shin-deep feed entire counties, every year a mast year.

Now the gods are dying, all of them. The full force of human ingenuity can't stop the disaster breaking over the continent. The blight runs along ridgelines, killing off peak after peak. A person perched on an overlook above the southern mountains can watch the trunks change to gray-white skeletons in a rippling wave. Loggers race through a dozen states to cut down whatever the fungus hasn't reached. The nascent Forest Service encourages them. *Use the wood, at least, before it's ruined.* And in that salvage mission, men kill any tree that might contain the secret of resistance.

A five-year-old in Tennessee who sees the first orange spots appear in her magic woods will have nothing left to show her own children except pictures. They'll never see the ripe, full habit of the tree, never know the sight and sound and smell of their mother's childhood. Millions of dead stumps sprout suckers that struggle on, year after year, before dying of an infection that, preserved in these stubborn shoots, will never disappear. By 1940, the fungus takes everything, all the way out to the farthest stands in southern Illinois. Four billion trees in the native range vanish into myth. Aside from a few secret pockets of resistance, the only chestnuts left are those that pioneers took far away, to states beyond the reach of the drifting spores.

FRANK HOEL JR. keeps his promise to his father, long after his father fades into blurry, black-and-white, overexposed memories. Each month the boy lays another photo in the balsam box. Soon he's an adolescent. Then a young man. He goes through the motions the way the extended Hoel family keeps celebrating St. Olaf's Day without remembering what it is.

Frank Jr. suffers nothing from imagination. He can't even hear himself think: *It's very possible that I hate this tree. It's very possible that I love it more than I loved my father.* The thoughts can mean nothing to a man with no real independent desire, born under the thing he is chained to and fated to die under it, too. He thinks: *This thing has no business here. It's no good to anyone unless we chop it down.* Then there are months when, through the viewfinder, the spreading crown seems to his surprised eye like the template for meaning itself.

In summer, water rises through the xylem and disperses out of the million tiny mouths on the undersides of leaves, a hundred gallons a day evaporating from the tree's airy crown into the humid Iowa air. In fall, the yellowing leaves fill Frank Jr. with nostalgia. In winter, bare branches click and hum above the drifts, their blunt resting buds almost sinister with waiting. But for a moment each spring, the pale green catkins and cream-colored flowers put thoughts into Frank Jr.'s head, thoughts he doesn't know how to have.

The third Hoel photographer keeps on taking pictures, just as he keeps going to church long after deciding that the entire faithful world has been duped by fairy tales. His pointless photographic ritual gives Frank Jr.'s life a blind purpose that even farming cannot give. It's a monthly exercise in noticing a thing worth no notice at all, a creature as steadfast and reticent as life.

The stack of photos hits the five-hundred mark during World War II. Frank Jr. stops one

afternoon to flip through the pictures. He himself feels like the same boy who made an ill-advised promise to his father at the age of nine. But the time-lapse tree has changed beyond all recognition.

When all the mature trees in the chestnut's native range are gone, the Hoel tree becomes a curiosity. A dendrologist in Iowa City comes out to confirm the rumor: a chestnut that escaped the holocaust. A journalist from the *Register* does a feature on one of the last of America's perfect trees. *More than twelve hundred places east of the Mississippi have the word "Chestnut" in them. But you have to come to a rural county in western Iowa to lay eyes on one.* Ordinary people, driving between New York and San Francisco on the new interstate that cuts a channel alongside the Hoel farm, see only a fountain of shade in the lone and level expanses of corn and soy.

In the bitter cold of February 1965, the No. 2 Brownie cracks. Frank Jr. replaces it with an Instamatic. The stack grows thicker than any book he has ever tried to read. But each photo in the sheaf shows only that lone tree, shrugging off the staggering emptiness that the man knows so well. The farm is to Frank Jr.'s back, each time he opens the lens. The photos hide everything: the twenties that do not roar for the Hoels. The Depression that costs them two hundred acres and sends half the family to Chicago. The radio shows that ruin two of Frank Jr.'s sons for farming. The Hoel death in the South Pacific and the two Hoel guilty survivals. The Deeres and Caterpillars parading through the tractor shed. The barn that burns to the ground one night to the screams of helpless animals. The dozens of joyous weddings, christenings, and graduations. The half dozen adulteries. The two divorces sad enough to silence songbirds. One son's unsuccessful campaign for the state legislature. The lawsuit between cousins. The three surprise pregnancies. The protracted Hoel guerrilla war against the local pastor and half the Lutheran parish. The handiwork of heroin and Agent Orange that comes home with nephews from 'Nam. The hushed-up incest, the lingering alcoholism, a daughter's elopement with the high school English teacher. The cancers (breast, colon, lung), the heart disease, the degloving of a worker's fist in a grain auger, the car death of a cousin's child on prom night. The countless tons of chemicals with names like Rage, Roundup, and Firestorm, the patented seeds engineered to produce sterile plants. The fiftieth wedding anniversary in Hawaii and its disastrous aftermath. The dispersal of retirees to Arizona and Texas. The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprise generosity: everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos' frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that solo tree, its fissured bark spiraling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood.

Extinction sneaks up on the Hoel farm—on all the family farms in western Iowa. The tractors grow too monstrous, the railroad cars full of nitrogen fertilizer too expensive, the competition too large and efficient, the margins too marginal, and the soil too worn by repeated row-cropping to make a profit. Each year, another neighbor is swallowed up into the massive, managed, relentlessly productive monocrop factories. Like humans everywhere in the face of catastrophe, Frank Hoel Jr. goes blinking into his fate. He takes on debt. He sells off acreage and rights. He signs deals with the seed companies he shouldn't. Next year, he's sure—*next year*, something will come along and save them, as it always has.

All told, Frank Jr. adds seven hundred and fifty-five photos of the solitary giant to the hundred and sixty that his father and grandfather shot. On the twenty-first day of the last April of his life, with Frank Jr. confined to bed, his son Eric travels out to the farm from his home forty minutes away and sets up on the rise to snap yet one more black-and-white, now filled to the frame with exuberant branches. Eric shows the print to the old man. It's easier than trying to tell



his father he loves him.

Frank Jr. grimaces at a taste like bitter almonds. “Listen. I made a promise, and I kept it. You don’t owe nobody. Leave that damn thing be.”

He might as well command the giant chestnut itself to stop spreading.

THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY dances by in a five-second flip. Nicholas Hoel thumbs through the stack of a thousand photos, watching for those decades’ secret meaning. At twenty-five, he’s back for a moment on the farm where he has spent every Christmas of his life. He’s lucky to be there, given the cancellations. Snowstorms sweep in from the west, grounding planes all over the country.

He and his folks have driven out to be with his grandmother. Tomorrow, more family will arrive from all over the state. With a flip through the photos, the farm memories come back to him: the holidays of his childhood, the entire clan gathering for turkey or carols, midsummer flags and fireworks. It’s all encoded somehow in that animated tree, the gatherings in each season, joining his cousins for days of exploration and corn-bound boredom. Flipping backward through the photos, Nicholas feels the years peel off like steamed wallpaper.

Always the animals. First the dogs—especially the three-legged one, half wild with affection every time Nick’s family pulled into the long gravel drive. Then the horses’ hot breath and the stiff shock of cows’ bristles. Snakes threading the harvested stalks. A stumbled-on rabbits’ nest down by the mailbox. One July, half-feral cats emerging from under the front porch, smelling of mystery and curdled milk. The small gifts of dead mice on the farm’s back doorstep.

The five-second film triggers primal scenes. Prowling the machine shed, with its engines and arcane tools. Sitting in the Hoel-crowded kitchen, breathing in the moldy, cracked linoleum while squirrels thumped in their hidden nests between the wall studs. Digging for hours with two younger cousins, their antique pear-handle shovels cutting a trench down into what Nick promised would soon be magma.

He sits upstairs at the rolltop desk in his dead grandfather’s study sampling a project that outlasted four generations of its makers. Of all the cargo packed into the Hoel farmhouse—the hundred cookie jars and glass snow globes, the attic box containing his father’s old report cards, the foot-pumped bellows organ rescued from the church where his great-grandfather was baptized, his father’s and uncles’ archaic toys, polished pine skittle bowling pins, and an incredible city run by magnets underneath the streets—this stack of photos has always been the one farm treasure he could never get enough of. Each picture on its own shows nothing but the tree he climbed so often he could do it blind. But flipped through, a Corinthian column of wood swells under his thumb, rousing itself and shaking free. Three-quarters of a century runs by in the time it takes to say grace. Once, as a nine-year-old, at the farm for Easter dinner, Nick riffled through the stack so many times that his grandfather cuffed him and hid the pictures away on the highest shelf of the mothballed closet. Nick was up on a chair and into the stack again as soon as the adults were safely downstairs.

It’s his birthright, the Hoel emblem. No other family in the county had a tree like the Hoel tree. And no other family in Iowa could match the multigeneration photo project for pure weirdness. And yet the adults seemed sworn never to say where the project was going. Neither his grandparents nor his father could explain to him the point of the thick flip-book. His grandfather said, “I promised my father and he promised his.” But another time, from the same man: “Makes you think different about things, don’t it?” It did.

The farm was where Nick first started sketching. The penciled dreams of boys—rockets,

outlandish cars, massed armies, imaginary cities, more baroque with detail each year. Then wilder textures, directly observed—the forest of hairs on a caterpillar’s back and the stormy weather maps in the grain of floorboards. It was at the farm, drunk on the flip-book, that he first started to sketch branches. He lay on his back on the Fourth of July, looking up into the spreading tree while everyone else pitched horseshoes. There was a geometry to this constant splitting, a balance to the various thicknesses and lengths that lay beyond his powers as an artist to reveal. Sketching, he wondered what his brain would have to be like to distinguish each of the hundreds of lancet leaves on a given branch and recognize them as easily as he did the faces of his cousins.

One more flip through the magic movie, and faster than it takes for the black-and-white broccoli to turn again into a sky-probing giant, the nine-year-old cuffed by his grandfather turns into a teen, falls in love with God, prays to God nightly but rarely successfully to keep from masturbating to visions of Shelly Harper, grows away from God and toward the guitar, gets busted for half a joint of pot, is sentenced to six months in a juvie scared-straight facility near Cedar Rapids, and there—sketching for hours at a shot everything he can see through his steel-webbed dorm room windows—realizes that he needs to spend his life making strange things.

He was sure the idea would be a hard sell. Hoels were farmers, feed store owners, and farm equipment salesmen like his father, violently practical people grounded in the logic of land and driven to work long, relentless days, year after year, without ever asking why. Nick prepared himself for a showdown, something out of the D. H. Lawrence novels that helped him survive high school. He practiced for weeks, choking on the absurdity of the request: *Dad, I would very much like to plunge off the edge of commonsense existence, at your expense, and become certifiably unemployable.*

He chose an early spring night. His father lay on a divan on the screened-in porch, as he did most nights, reading a biography of Douglas MacArthur. Nicholas sat in the recliner next to him. Sweet breezes blew in through the screen and uncombed his hair. “Dad? I need to go to art school.”

His father looked out over the top of his book, like he was gazing out on the ruins of his lineage. “I figured it would be something like that.” And Nick was gone, reeled out on a leash long enough to reach the Chicago Loop, with the freedom to test all the flaws inherent in his own desire.

At school in Chicago, he learned many things:

1. Human history was the story of increasingly disoriented hunger.
2. Art was nothing he thought it was.
3. People would make just about anything you can think to make. Intricate scrimshawed portraits on the tips of pencil leads. Polyurethane-coated dog shit. Earthworks that could pass for small nations.
4. Makes you think different about things, don’t it?

His cohort laughed at his little pencil sketches and hyperreal, trompe-l’oeil paintings. But he kept making them, season after season. And by his third year, he became notorious. Even cattily admired.

Winter night of senior year, in his rented broom closet in Rogers Park, he had a dream. A woman student he loved asked him, *What is it that you really want to make?* He bared his hands to the sky, shrugging. Tiny wells of blood pooled in the center of his palms. Up from those pools grew two branching spines. He thrashed in a panic, back up to consciousness. Half an hour

passed before his heart slowed enough for him to realize where those spines came from: the time-lapse pictures of the chestnut his gypsy-Norwegian great-great-great-grandfather planted, one hundred and twenty years before, while self-enrolled in that correspondence school of primitive art, the plains of western Iowa.

Nick sits at the rolltop, flipping once more through the book. Last year he won the Stern Prize for Sculpture from the School of the Art Institute. This year, he's a stock boy for a famous Chicago department store that has been dying a slow death for a quarter of a century. Granted, he has earned a degree that licenses him to make peculiar artifacts capable of embarrassing his friends and angering strangers. There's a U-Stor-It in Oak Park crammed with papier-mâché costumes for street masques and surreal sets for a show that ran in a little theater near Andersonville and closed three nights later. But at twenty-five, the scion of a long line of farmers wants to believe that his best work might still be ahead of him.

It's the day before Christmas Eve. Hoels will descend en masse tomorrow, but his grandmother is already in hog heaven. She lives for these days when the old, drafty house fills up with descendants. There's no farm anymore, just the house on its island rise. All the Hoel land is long-term leased to outfits run from offices hundreds of miles away. The Iowa earth has been brought to its rationalized end. But for a while, for this holiday, the place will be all miracle births and saviors in mangers, as it was at Hoel Christmases for a hundred and twenty years running.

Nick heads downstairs. It's midmorning, and his grandmother, father, and mother huddle around the kitchen table where the pecan rolls flow and the dominoes are already getting worn down to little Chiclets. Outside, the cold dips well below bitter. To counter the polar north winds pouring through the cedar-sided walls, Eric Hoel has cranked up the old propane space heater. There's a fire blazing in the fireplace, food enough to feed the five thousand, and a new TV as big as Wyoming tuned to a football game no one cares about.

Nicholas says, "Who's up for Omaha?" There's an American Landscapes exhibit at the Joslyn Museum, only an hour away. When he pitched the idea the night before, the old folks seemed interested. Now they look away.

His mother smiles, embarrassed for him. "I'm feeling a little fluish, honey."

His father adds, "We're all pretty cozy, Nick." His grandmother nods in woozy agreement.

"Kay," Nicholas says. "Heck with you all! I'll be back for dinner."

Snow blows across the interstate, while more is falling. But he's a midwesterner, and his father wouldn't be his father without putting virgin snow tires on the car. The American Landscapes show is spectacular. The Sheelers alone send Nick into fits of jealous gratitude. He stays until the museum kicks him out. When he leaves, it's dark and the drifts swirl up above his boots.

He finds his way back onto the interstate and creeps east. The road is whited out. All the drivers foolish enough to attempt travel cling to one another's taillights in slow procession through the white. The rut Nick plows has only the most abstract relation to the lane beneath. The shoulder's rumble strip is so muffled by snow he can't hear it.

Under a viaduct, he hits a sheet of frictionless ice. The car slaloms sideways. He surrenders to the freestyle slide, coaxing the car like a kite until it straightens. He flips his high beams on and off, trying to decide which is less blinding against the snowy curtain. After an hour, he has gone almost twenty miles.

A scene unfolds in the snow-black tunnel like a night-vision clip from a cop documentary. An oncoming eighteen-wheeler jackknives into the median and swings around like a wounded

animal, popping up on Nick's side a hundred yards in front of him. He swerves past the wreck and slides off to the right shoulder. The right rear of the car bounces off the guardrail. His front left bumper kisses the truck's rear tire. He skids to a stop and starts shaking, so hard he can't steer. The car edges itself into a rest area crawling with stranded motorists.

There's a pay phone in front of the toilets. He calls the house, but the call won't go through. Night before Christmas Eve, and phone lines are down all over the state. He's sure his parents must be worried sick. But the only sane thing to do is curl up in the car and sleep for a couple of hours until everything blows over and the plows catch up with God's shit fit.

He's back on the road a little before dawn. The snow has mostly stopped, and cars creep by in both directions. He crawls home. The hardest part of the drive is climbing the little rise at the end of the interstate exit. He fishtails up the ramp and turns onto the road back to the farm. The way is drifted over. The Hoel Chestnut appears from a long way off, piled up in white, the only spire all the way to the horizon. Two small lights shine from the house's upstairs windows. He can't imagine what anyone is doing up so early. Someone has waited up all night for word of him.

The road to the house is piled high in snow. His grandfather's old truck-plow is still in the shed. His father should have run it down and back at least a couple of times by now. Nick fights the drifts, but they're too much. He leaves the car halfway up the drive and walks the last stretch to the house. Pushing through the front door, he bursts out singing. "Oh, the weather outside is frightful!" But there's no one downstairs to laugh.

Later, he'll wonder whether he knew already, there in the front doorway. But no: He must walk around to the foot of the stairs where his father is lying, head downward and arms bent at impossible angles, praising the floor. Nick shouts and drops to help his father, but there's nothing left to help. He stands and takes the stairs, two at a time. But by now everything is as clear as Christmas, everything anyone needs to know. Upstairs, the two women curl up in their bedrooms and can't be wakened—a late-morning sleep-in on Christmas Eve.

Blur rises up his legs and torso. He's drowning in pitch. He runs back downstairs, where the old propane heater still cranks away, venting gas that rises and pools invisibly underneath the ceiling that Nick's father has so recently snugged up with extra insulation. Nick blunders through the front door, trips down the porch steps, and falls into the snow. He rolls over in the freezing white, gasping and reviving. When he looks up, it's into the branches of the sentinel tree, lone, huge, fractal, and bare against the drifts, lifting its lower limbs and shrugging its ample globe. All its profligate twigs click in the breeze as if this moment, too, so insignificant, so transitory, will be written into its rings and prayed over by branches that wave their semaphores against the bluest of midwestern winter skies.